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Sculpting Public Space

Janet Echelman

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Sculpting Public Space

An Interview with Janet Echelman

Echelman: I'm really honored to be a part of this. Authenticity is something I think about, so it's a really nice pairing to be a part of this issue.

Oz: That's the reason you came up as we were searching for contributors; because it's clear you are working towards a vision that is unique to you and you surpass any challenges that come up along the way to continue this vision. Your work is a perfect fit to our theme.

You know, each site requires and sort of inspires a different response, that's what makes this practice so inspiring. I am continually challenged and engaged in the work, and finding the authentic response to what each place needs. Each culture, each climate, each urban condition, requires a search to find the right artistic response.

I think that's wonderfully put. As architects we struggle with the same thing, so it's very ironic to hear you talk about that. You often discuss place and how your sculptures respond to place. Are the sites where you create installations pre-selected for you, or do you choose them?

It's different all the time. Many commissions have a pre-established site and a preestablished budget and timeline, and they are searching for an artist. So, in those situations, I come in almost as a lay-person's anthropologist—a kind of amateur anthropologist—where I explore, and interview, and sketch, and pho-

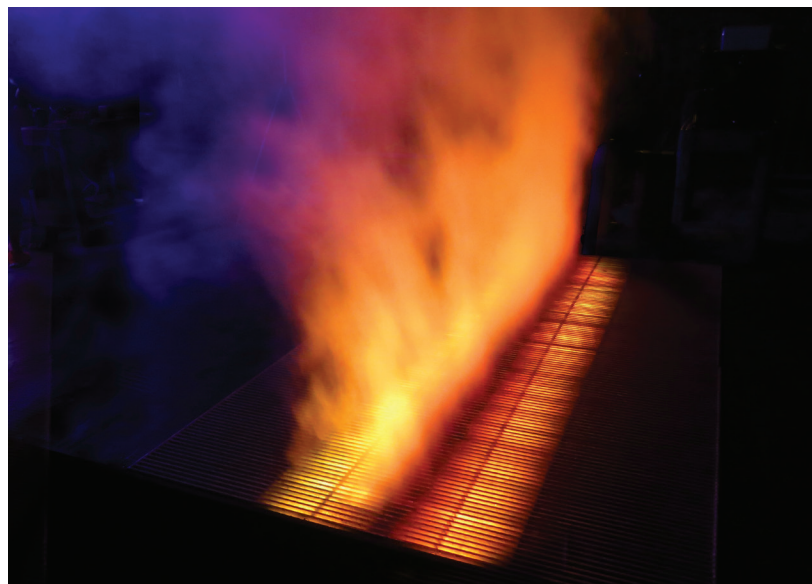
tograph as a means of trying to understand local identity or aspirations for local identity and local materials. In Phoenix, Arizona I was moved by the way clouds cast shadows on the ground, and how people waiting for the bus will line up in the narrow shadow cast by a street pole. That became an influence in how I thought about that piece. In Philadelphia, in front of their beloved masonry city hall built more than a century ago, I felt that fiber was the wrong material, so I searched for something that could speak to the history of that site, and it was water. The content was about the relationship of water and steam to the history and development of industrial Philadelphia. That work is a moving series of curtains of mist, which reflect in the plaza above the real-time movements of subway trains below ground. So, there's no easy way to express this, but it's a continual search for me, it never gets easy or fast. The search for an authentic, satisfying work, seems to always require an iterative, lengthy exploration for me. And it just takes time.

That actually leads us into one of our key questions that was in our theme statement. Why is it that you've continued to stick to this process and this line of work even though it is something that is difficult and lengthy?

Because I can't live without it. It's like a love affair—can't live with it, can't live without it. It is like a love affair in that I am drawn to and compelled to engage in this process because



Photo by Jill Richer





I love it. That said, it's never easy and it's never fast. It's not a stroke of lightening that hits you, it's more development and response. We might have a hundred iterations before I feel we have found the authentic, right fit... And it's fun, it's playful, it's surprising—we never know where this is going to go, but I can always tell you it never goes to the right place immediately. Speaking to students and young practitioners, I think it's important to keep your boundaries wide and to let yourself play because

surprising outcomes need permission, and they need space, and crazy ideas deserve a chance to be developed. You know, if there's something about my work that's worth noting it's that what seemed like a crazy off-handed idea of taking twine from the craft of fishermen, and bringing that to the scale of architecture, I mean, that's kind of a silly idea and it doesn't seem like it would have much merit, but methodically playing with it and testing it and evolving the craft has led to some surprising outcomes. I

think the lesson from me that I would share is to take your crazy ideas seriously enough to develop them before dismissing them.

I think that's excellent advice for any young creator who's searching for what they want to do in the future.

Build a model before dismissing your idea as ridiculous, give it the respect to build a physical model, because you might discover in that process that there is more there than you

first realized. I found this to be true in my very first explorations on the beach in India, made in collaboration with fishermen. I never set out to be a sculptor of wind—it was in the process of learning from artisans or learning from people who live from their craft that I made some small scale models, but when we lifted them onto to beach to photograph them, I discovered this ever-changing choreography with wind. I would never have discovered that by thinking about the idea; it was building

them and testing them that led me to that discovery.

It opens up a way for your sculptures to relate to the places that they're in. It's a very unique and powerful way for people to experience the art, because when you see the wind dance with the sculpture, you can also feel it pressing against your own body, and you know inherently that you and the sculpture are sharing both a place and a moment. It makes each sculpture very authentic to the place where people are viewing it. As time has progressed, your sculptures have grown to be much larger and more intricate. Do you feel that you've strayed away from the original idea of the hand tied knots that you saw on the beaches of India, or do you still always try to incorporate that into your designs? I know for some of the sculptures you've started using technology and large machinery to produce them, but does the tie back to hand craft still come across?

I'm not feeling that I've lost something. I feel like I keep gaining something. There's still an incredible amount of hand craft, and artisanry in the production of the new works. We use looms to create panels but we hand trim them, hand join them, and hand splice every rope that make the structural layers, so I don't feel any lack of craft. I am intrigued by the craft that can be found within the machine process. For example, the industrial looms that we use have two hundreds bobbins across and we can mix the bobbin colors and change them in and out throughout the process. So, we take an industrial process and we craft it. We sort of subvert it by adding in hand changes, which keeps it really interesting for me. Frankly, my goal in using this material is not about fishing, it's about soft materials that are capable of reflecting changing conditions, and what I've discovered is that the diamond mesh methodology is about forces in equilibrium, and it is incredibly



Photo by Smithsonian Institute



Photo by Bruce Petschek



Photo by Ben Visbeek



robust and resilient, which may be the reason it is a technology that humans have utilized for thousands of years. The tensile strength that ropes can offer is noteworthy, and we are constantly exploring how to balance compression and tension in my work. We're working with engineers of brilliant capabilities, I'm so privileged to work with brilliant engineers and it's a mystery that I'm continuing to uncover together with my colleagues. In no way do I feel I have solved the questions. We are engaged in trying to understand these forces and the best way to respond to them—the forces of wind, the forces of the weight with ice on my structures, how to design for snow. These are such interesting and challenging questions especially because these sculptures are freestanding structures versus adapting and attaching to preexisting architecture for structure.

Could you elaborate on how these sculptures are structured?

It's a different enterprise to design a free-standing work where you relate to yourself and you must deal with all the forces. For example, take my project for Boston where I worked with three pre-existing skyscrapers. It's a more relational practice, to understand the structure of those buildings—where to attach to them, how to relate to them aesthetically and structurally. These kinds of challenges really intrigue me. I think it's appropriate for our age because we are living in a time where resilience and the ability to adapt is critical, and a practice that is about understanding and working with pre-existing conditions and forces is an appropriate response to our time.

You research each place and each site so meticulously; you really try to get into how people interact with their surroundings, their environment, and the built environment as a whole. Do you feel that architecture is lacking



this thorough of a response? Is there something that you feel your process and your years of creating this kind of art can teach architects? Is there something that we, as architects miss?

I think maybe if we all thought of ourselves as amateur anthropologists at the beginning, where we don't expect to give answers but rather to learn about the culture. And the client organization might be the culture, the city could be the culture, the usage of

how people walk and use the space is part of that culture. If we think of ourselves as researchers to understand, and think of each building as part of a culture, that could be helpful. That's a process that's helped me and I can imagine that could be helpful in the design of a building as well.

That's really helpful advice. It's marvelous the way you speak about your process and creating art, and the struggles you come across. It's content that we

as architects deal with as well, it's an odd parallel we've found.

Collaboration is critical to my process in that I credit my colleagues with where we've been able to bring this practice—my colleagues from engineering, architecture, lighting design, landscape, industrial teams, and artisans. That's something to make sure to mention.